

Message Text

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FOR ATHERTON

FOLLOWING REPEAT MOSCOW 18744 ACTION SECSTATE

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QUOTE

C O N F I D E N T I A L

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: EG, IS, UR, XF

SUBJECT:AS THE SOVIETS VIEW THE MIDDLE EAST AT YEAR'S END

SUMMARY: RECENT EVENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST HAVE UNDER-
SCORED THE DECLINE OF SOVIET INFLUENCE IN THE AREA.

ALTHOUGH THE SITUATIONCOULD CHANGE RAPIDLY, THE SOVIETS
NOW RECOGNIZE THAT THE SADAT-BEGIN TALKS ARE POTENTIALLY
A MAJOR THREAT TO WHAT REMAINS OF THEIR ROLE IN THE
MIDDLE EAST AND THAT THEY HAVE FEW EFFECTIVE INSTRUMENTS
AT THEIR DISPOSAL TO PREVENT THIS THREAT FROM
MATERIALIZING. END SUMMARY.

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1. AS SOVIET POLICYMAKERS MAKE A YEAR-END ASSESSMENT
OF THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST THEY CAN ONLY BE
DISHEARTENED AND DISCOURAGED. THEIR HOPES FOR INVOLVE-
MENT IN AN INFLUENCE OVER A MIDDLE EASTERN PEACE
CONFERENCE HAVE RECEIVED A SERIOUS SETBACK AND THERE
SEEMS TO BE LITTLE BASIS FROM WHICH TO CONSTRUCT A

DIPLOMATIC RESPONSE TO THE SADAT-BEGIN INITIATIVES.

2. MOSCOW

HAS SEEN ITS INFLUENCE AND ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST ERODE IN RECENT YEARS AS THE OLD LEVERS OF INFLUENCE --ARMS AID AND POLITICAL SUPPORT FOR ARAB CAUSES -- HAVE LOST A GREAT DEAL OF THEIR EFFECTIVENESS. THE ARABS HAVE DISCOVERED THAT SOVIET WEAPONS IN ARAB HANDS HAVE NOT PREVAILED AGAINST ISRAEL AND DIVISIONS AND RIVALRIES HAVE FORCED THE SOVIETS ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS TO TAKE SIDES IN INTRA-ARAB DISPUTES. THE COMPLEXITY OF ISSUES SUCH AS THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION, MOREOVER, HAVE MADE IT DIFFICULT, IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE, FOR THE SOVIETS TO TAKE POSITIONS ACCEPTABLE TO ALL ARABS.

3. THE CURRENT ROUND OF EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI DIPLOMACY HAS ONLY SERVED TO AGGRAVATE SOVIET PROBLEMS IN THE AREA AND, WORST OF ALL, TO HIGHLIGHT THE DECLINE OF SOVIET INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST. TO SAY THAT MOSCOW HAS BEEN REDUCED TO THE STATUS OF AN ANGRY BYSTANDER IS TO EXAGGERATE THE SITUATION ONLY SLIGHTLY. THE USSR NOW FINDS THAT IT HAS FEW DIPLOMATIC INSTRUMENTS AT ITS DISPOSAL TO PREVENT OR UNDERMINE NEGOTIATIONS WHICH IT REGARDS AS DIRECT THREAT TO ITS POLITICAL POSITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST.
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4. MOSCOW'S FIRST HOPE WAS PROBABLY THAT SADAT'S INITIATIVE WOULD SHOCK OTHER ARAB COUNTRIES INTO AT LEAST A SHOW OF SOLIDARITY THAT SOVIET DIPLOMACY COULD THEN LEAD IN A RUMP "UNITED FRONT" THEREBY UNDERMINING THE SADAT INITIATIVES. BUT EVEN IN THIS EVENT THERE WAS LITTLE LIKELIHOOD SUCH A FRONT WOULD AGREE TO THE CONVOCAION OF THE GENEVA CONFERENCE, THUS LEAVING THE SOVIETS LITTLE TO SHOW FOR THEIR EFFORTS AND DEMONSTRATING FURTHER THE COMPLEXITY OF THE PROBLEMS MOSCOW FACES IN ITS MIDDLE EASTERN DIPLOMACY. THIS SOLID ANTI-SADAT FRONT, HOWEVER, DID NOT MATERIALIZE AT TRIPOLI. WHILE SOVIET DIPLOMACY UNDOUBTEDLY CONTINUES TO ATTEMPT TO FORGE SUCH A FRONT, THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT SUCH DISPARATE FORCES AS SYRIA, IRAQ, LIBYA, AND THE PALESTINIANS ARE ANY CLOSER TO SOLIDARITY THAN THEY WERE AT TRIPOLI.

5. THE VISIT TO MOSCOW OF THE SYRIAN CHIEF OF THE GENERAL STAFF SUGGESTS THE SECOND LINE OF SOVIET COUNTERATTACK: MILITARY AID. THIS IS THE TRADITIONAL SOVIET RESPONSE TO A TICKLISH POLITICAL PROBLEM BUT

OVER TIME IT HAS BEEN SHOWN TO BE OF LIMITED UTILITY AND HIGHLY UNRELIABLE. MOREOVER, UNDER PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES IT IS DOUBTFUL THAT MOSCOW GENUINELY BELIEVES THAT ITS POLITICAL GOALS CAN BE SERVED SIGNIFICANTLY BY EVEN MAJOR INFUSIONS OF ARMS AID.

6. ONE OF THE MAJOR REASONS FOR MOSCOW'S DETERMINATION TO CONVENE A GENEVA CONFERENCE IS ITS REALIZATION THAT THE OLD INSTRUMENTS OF INFLUENCE ARE OF DIMINISHING UTILITY. THE SOVIET UNION CLEARLY LOOKED UPON ITS ROLE OF GENEVA CO-CHAIRMAN AS ONE OF GREAT AUTHORITY, ENABLING MOSCOW TO DISPENSE FAVORS AND TO PENALIZE THE RECALCITRANT AT THE CONFERENCE. GENEVA WAS (AND STILL IS) LOOKED UPON AS THE MEANS
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WHEREBY MOSCOW COULD REASSERT ITS RIGHTS AS A GREAT POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND RECOUP ITS LOSSES OF RECENT YEARS. WHETHER THIS IS A REALISTIC PICTURE OF HOW A GENEVA CONFERENCE WOULD UNFOLD MAY BE QUESTIONED, BUT AT THIS POINT THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT THAT GENEVA REPRESENTS SOMETHING OF A LAST BEST HOPE FOR THE ASSERTION OF MAJOR SOVIET INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

7. MOSCOW, OF COURSE, STILL HAS POINTS OF INFLUENCE AND FRIENDS IN THE AREA AND THE EBB AND FLOW OF MIDDLE EASTERN POLITICS MAKE ANY PREDICTION HAZARDOUS. THUS IT IS POSSIBLE - ALTHOUGH UNLIKELY- THAT THE SOVIETS WILL MAKE A STRONG COMEBACK IN THE AREA. AT PRESENT, HOWEVER, IT IS CLEAR THAT THE SOVIET LEADERS ARE CONSCIOUS OF THE WANING OF THEIR INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST; THAT THEY REGARD ISRAELI-ARAB TENSIONS AS BENEFICIAL TO THEIR INTERESTS; THAT THEY LOOK TO THE GENEVA CONFERENCE AS THE WAY TO REGAIN INFLUENCE; AND THAT, CONSEQUENTLY, THEY REGARD THE PROSPECT OF SUCCESSFUL EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI TALKS WHICH EVENTUALLY DRAW IN OTHER ARAB STATES AS A STRONG THREAT TO THEIR POSITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST.
MATLOCK
UNQUOTE CHRISTOPHER".

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